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SUBJECT: KENYA'S ELECTORAL CRISIS: EXPLAINING RIFT VALLEY
VIOLENCE

REF: A. NAIROBI 237

[1](#)B. NAIROBI 12

[1](#)C. 07 NAIROBI 4423

[1](#)D. 07 NAIROBI 4235

Summary

[1](#)1. The central region of Kenya's Rift Valley Province, known as "Kalenjin land" after its indigenous inhabitants, is the scene of the worst violence since the election crisis began in late December. Kenya's history of ethnic politics, land pressures, and shifting political alliances explain the intensity and scale of the violence in this region. The Kalenjin population has nursed grievances against the more widespread Kikuyus ever since President Jomo Kenyatta handed over Kalenjin land (some of it formerly occupied by white settlers) to his fellow Kikuyus shortly after independence in [1](#)1963. Repeated failures to address Kalenjin grievances by subsequent governments, even the government run by fellow Kalenjin President Daniel arap Moi from 1978 to 2002, has periodically led to violence in the Rift Valley, particularly during the 1990s. Much of the 1990s violence was politically instigated by Moi and his lieutenants who funded Kalenjin "raiders" to de-populate pro-opposition, Kikuyu-settled areas of Rift Valley Province.

[1](#)2. An internationally acceptable solution to the current crisis would have to include an acknowledgement by all sides that Kenyans have the right to own land anywhere in the country regardless of their ethnicity, but this will only happen if Kalenjins feel adequately represented in and fairly treated by their government. Strengthening parliament and the judiciary, devolving government, and making much-needed land tenure and property rights reforms would ameliorate the current conflict. End Summary.

Rift? Why Rift?

[1](#)3. It may seem counterintuitive that the worst ethnic violence in the current crisis -- the aftermath of a bitterly disputed Kikuyu vs. Luo presidential contest (see ref B) -- would occur in the heart of Rift Valley's Kalenjin country. While the Kikuyu, Kenya's largest and most geographically dispersed ethnic community, have borne the brunt of the

conflict wherever it has occurred, anti-Kikuyu violence in Kalenjin-dominated Rift Valley has been much more organized and severe than elsewhere. (Note: In Nyanza, the Luo-on-Kikuyu violence was reportedly a spontaneous reaction to allegations that the election had been rigged in favor of President Kibaki (a Kikuyu) over opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) candidate Raila Odinga (a Luo). End Note.) Some observers, including Human Rights Watch, have concluded that ODM leaders and local elders planned and organized the violence in the Rift Valley, although we do not yet have evidence that the violence was pre-meditated.

¶4. Kenya's history of ethnic politics, land pressures, and shifting political alliances make Kalenjin land highly susceptible to ethnic violence. Approximately 250,000 people have been displaced countrywide. While victims have included members of many tribes, the vast majority at this point have been Kikuyu. Kikuyus who have lived their entire lives in Rift Valley Province have seen their homes, farms, and businesses burned. The official death toll from the violence now exceeds 900. There are an estimated 83,700 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Rift Valley Province alone. (To put this in perspective, an estimated one million Kikuyus live in Rift Valley Province.) Eyewitnesses have blamed gangs of Kalenjin youth, many of whom had just completed initiation rites into the traditional warrior society, for the rash of looting, burning, and violence.

The Present of a People is a Sum of Their Past

¶5. Much of the current Kikuyu-Kalenjin tension can be traced

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to land issues coupled with a strong dose of political manipulation of this issue. Land issues are also at the source of much of Kenya's history of political violence. As a result of white settler confiscation of the richest Kikuyu land in Kenya's fertile central highlands and severe overcrowding in the reserves on marginal land left for the Kikuyu by the British, the Kikuyu mounted the Mau Mau rebellion in 1952 with the rallying cry "land and freedom." The British reaction to the rebellion was infamously harsh. The post-election violence this year is the worst in Kenya since that seven year struggle in the 1950s. Both conflicts are essentially over access to land. (While spontaneous post-election violence in Nyanza, Western and Coast provinces focused on the electoral dispute, it is clear that much of the violence in Rift Valley Province is more directly related to land grievances. To this day, it is exceptionally difficult for non-Kikuyu to own land or operate businesses in overcrowded Central Province.)

¶6. Outgrowing their rich but densely populated Central Highlands homeland, Kikuyu are the only ethnic group that has spread throughout Kenya in large numbers. Kikuyus own farms, businesses and properties throughout the country. The Kikuyu have a reputation, whether deserved or not, for being unwilling to enter into business partnerships or employ in senior positions Kenyans from other tribes. They are widely resented for their wealth and power relative to other Kenyan groups.

¶7. The Nilotic speakers of Kenya's southern highlands (as distinct from Bantu speakers, such as Kikuyu) include Nandis, Kipsigis, Pokot, Marakwet, Tugen, Elgeyo, and Sabaot. The Nandis in particular were renowned for their effective resistance to early British efforts to take their land. The British eventually prevailed and successfully occupied Rift Valley lands, but only after multiple attempts. The seeds of an ethnic "Kalenjin" identity emerged as members of these related but distinct groups served together with British forces in World War II. ("Kale" or "Kole" refers to the process of scarring a warrior who has killed an enemy in battle, and "Kalenjin" -- or "I tell you" -- and was used in

Rift Valley wartime radio broadcasts.) The Kalenjin movement was begun by a group of students from these groups who wanted to distinguish themselves while attending an elite (and majority Kikuyu) high school. The British colonial government encouraged the Kalenjin movement as a way to foster anti-Kikuyu sentiments, as they were busily trying to suppress the Mau Mau uprising and peasant revolt from spreading to other Kenyan ethnic communities.

¶8. Kenya's first post-independence president, Jomo Kenyatta (a Kikuyu and the alleged leader of the Mau Mau revolt) bought land in Kalenjin areas from departing white settlers to resettle landless Kikuyu peasants or, in many instances, to grant to political allies, cronies, and himself. While this was done with the collaboration of his (Kalenjin) Home Affairs Minister Daniel Arap Moi, this was a serious offense to ordinary Kalenjins. In Kalenjin culture, there was no such thing as individual land ownership. While individuals could cultivate certain plots, the land as a whole belonged to the Kalenjin people. The transfer of Kalenjin land to outsiders was a serious affront.

¶9. When Moi became president in 1978, he did little to address the continuing land grievances of common Kalenjins, but, after an attempted coup in 1982, he did take bold steps to exclude what had become a Kikuyu elite from government service and replaced them with his own Kalenjin elite. Predictably, many of these Kalenjin elite lost their jobs after President Kibaki -- another Kikuyu -- came into office in 2002. (Note: Many Kenyans take the attitude toward the Kalenjins that since they enjoyed the fruits of power during Moi's 24-year rule, they have nothing to complain about now. However, Kalenjins reply that, while their community may have been grossly overrepresented in the civil and security forces during Moi's reign, their region did not receive disproportionate budget resources and there was little or no benefit to Kalenjins who were not members of the elite. End Note.)

¶10. Frustration over 'outsider' occupation of Kalenjin land

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turned violent in the 1990s. President Moi and officials in the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) used the idea of federalism, or 'majimbo,' (see ref C) to battle opposition calls for term limits and multi-party democracy. KANU officials described majimbo as ethnic federalism that would require all 'outsiders' to return to their home provinces. This led to ethnic clashes that killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands throughout the decade. The Rift Valley was particularly hard hit, and it was clear at the time that the violence was planned, not spontaneous. The then-ruling party, under Moi, armed and organized Kalenjin fighters to 'raid' Kikuyu farms and homesteads in Rift Valley in order to decrease the opposition votes in those areas. Many of the people who were displaced from these clashes remain so to this day (and most of them were Kikuyu, who largely supported the opposition to Moi's rule). Those who hoped Kibaki would address the problem when he was elected in 2002 were disappointed -- a comprehensive solution never materialized. On the contrary, isolated clashes in Rift Valley continued. See ref D for more background on Rift Valley politics).

The Current Crisis

¶11. Ethnic rivalries played a predominant role in the run-up to the 2007 election, and ODM presidential hopeful Raila Odinga made majimbo (federalism) a key platform of his campaign. Odinga tried to de-emphasize majimbo's negative ethnic connotations, saying that the devolution of power to the provinces was the only way to ensure equitable distribution of resources to marginalized communities. This positive view of majimboism did not resonate with all parts

of Kenya's electorate, however, and many feared that a return to talk of majimbo would mean a return to the violence of the 1990s. Whatever Raila's intent, the more sinister version of majimbo -- 'outsiders must leave' -- came to pass in the Rift Valley Province in the aftermath of the disputed elections and the increased antipathy toward the Kikuyu community that those events engendered.

¶12. A recently circulated piece of Kalenjin hate literature illustrates commonly held frustrations used to justify violence against Kikuyus. The piece describes resentment of Kikuyus' perceived unfair occupation of land and disproportionate access to government resources for education, jobs, and infrastructure. Kalenjin bitterness is not reserved for Kikuyus, however. There is also no love lost for former President Moi, a fellow Kalenjin (who supported Kibaki's 2007 re-election bid): "He stole from us and did deals with these guys. He enriched himself so much; he is always ready to sacrifice his own people for his own benefits...what you guys need to understand is that this is all about resource distribution...As if this was not enough, they stole our votes and asked us to do what we think we can do. This is right guys, 'Do what you think you can do if you are man enough.'"

How Can the Roots of This Conflict Be Addressed?

¶13. Many observers blame ODM pentagon member William Ruto, a hardline Kalenjin and Moi lieutenant, for the Rift Valley violence. Ruto actively organized pro-Moi Kalenjin youth during the violent crises of the 1990s and rumors about his involvement in the current crisis abound despite his public denials.

¶14. Kalenjin religious leaders recently implored us to look deeper than Ruto, however. Kalenjins, they stressed, make decisions by consensus. Ruto is only representing the views of his people -- in fact, he is a prisoner to them, they said. Some have blamed Ruto for instigating violence regardless of the election outcome, since violence began prior to the announcement of the results. One leader defended Ruto, however, claiming that he learned on December 28 that the election results had been manipulated in the government's favor and that the final tally was already decided. This is why Ruto started raising objections before

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the results were announced, he said. (Comment: The religious leader claimed that he himself heard the final numbers two days before they were announced. Our own analysis of the election results shows that the final tally announced on December 30 differs from the sum of the individual constituency tallies as provided to us by the Election Commission. End Comment.)

¶15. While empowering hardliners like Ruto has almost certainly worsened the situation, arresting him (and those like him) who may have organized or encouraged violence addresses only a symptom of a much deeper problem. Any internationally acceptable solution would require an acknowledgement by all sides that Kenyans have the right to buy and own land anywhere in the country regardless of their ethnicity. The only way Kalenjins and other disgruntled minority groups would agree to this, however, is if they feel adequately represented in and treated fairly by their own government.

¶16. Strengthening parliament and the judiciary as well as implementing majimbo in its best sense -- 'increasing local control over resources and governance while protecting local minorities from prosecution by local majorities' -- could go a long way toward restoring a sense of ownership and control over local affairs by those who have been excluded and neglected over the years. Land tenure and property rights

reform could also help (see ref A). No matter how the solutions are crafted, they will require the buy-in of the Kalenjin community as a whole. (Note: Land reform and regional imbalances in national budget allocations are specific elements of the former dialog proposed by Kofi Annan to reconcile the government and opposition. End Note.)

¶17. Comment: Making progress on these complex issues will be difficult. There is still strong disagreement about the conduct and results of the presidential election, and hardliners still outweigh more moderate voices. At present, both sides' tactics are making the situation worse, and both sides have shown a disturbingly high tolerance for violence. If international and grassroots efforts fail, Kenyans living in Rift Valley will continue to bear the brunt of the conflict.

RANNEBERGER